

## NIGERIA AT 50: THE SEARCH FOR POLITICAL LEADERSHIP.

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### ABSTRACT

This paper through the unobtrusive method discusses political leadership in the Nigerian State in her five decades of political independence. The argument of the paper is that the Nigerian State has manifested more of political rulership as a result of the governmental processes that have to a great extent been exclusive of the people. The paper further unfolds that the effect of rulership has been political instability, institutional fragility and poor democratic culture in the Nigerian body-politic. The paper therefore concludes that the Nigerian State is in need of integrative political leadership for the consolidation of the present democratic process through a functional linkage between the politicians and the governed in order for the people to serve as vanguard of democracy.

**KEYWORDS:** democratic experiment, democratic norm, ethnicization, Integrative leadership, political instability, political party.

### INTRODUCTION

The pattern of political leadership to a great extent determines the political stability of a state. History no doubt has witnessed the emergence of political thoughts and philosophies designed towards altering political systems and governance as a result of political leadership. Examples abound in theoretical postulations of John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau among others (Mukherjee and Ramaswamy, 2007). While John Locke's argument against absolute monarchism serve as the justification of the removal of or dethronement of King James 2 based on his despotic and obnoxious governance, Rousseau's social contract theory on the other hand, served as the propelling force for the entrenchment of the 1789 Rights of man in France (Appadorai, 1975).

In the Nigerian State, political leadership has manifested itself in various forms and pattern depending on the era. In the pre-colonial days, political leadership was based on the cultural orientation of the different ethnic nationalities that later emerged as the State. For instance, the centralized political-administrative pattern was visible in the Hausa- Fulani section of the North with enormous powers exercised by the traditional rulers. In the west, the system though centralized the power of the traditional ruler was restricted because of institutional checks, while in the larger section of the East it was mostly a segmentary pattern in which political leadership was exercised by the leadership of the different classes and structure of the society (Azelama, 2010).

From this basic background, it is important to emphasize that unlike the western states of France and England in which political leadership witnessed a social change and transformation designed towards empowering the people as the focus of governance (Omodia 2006; Omodia 2007), in Nigeria, alterations in political governance during colonialism and after attainment of political independence were designed to achieve selfish ends either by the colonialist, the indigenous politicians and military dictators that tasted political power (Omodia, 2004). Thus, successive administrations in Nigeria have continued to embark on political reforms aimed at entrenching responsible and responsive political leadership vis-a-vis lasting democratic governance in Nigeria.

As a matter of fact, the experiment has witnessed the adoption of zoning system in the sharing of sensitive political offices, enlarging the political space to accommodate the active participation of retired military officers in Partisan politics, reforming the electoral system among others. It is however important to state that unfolding events especially in the political scene have shown that political experiments in Nigeria over the decades have been cosmetic because: (1) no meaningful political transformation can take place with the exclusion of the people in the process. (11) The same elites designing the change for the empowerment of the people are the ones resisting the same process and change.

To be able to vividly understand the above stated assertions, this paper in addition to the introduction is sectionalized into; the nature of political leadership under colonialism, the civilian administration up to the aborted third republic, the military and political leadership in the present democratic dispensation.

#### Political Leadership under Colonialism

Colonialism is the political domination of a state by another. It involves the total control of a state machinery of the power which include determining wealth creation and allocation of resources. The political domination of Africa states by colonialists after a long presence was basically propelled by the factor of resource exploitation (Rodney, 1972). As a result, the pattern of governance was fashioned towards the realization of this objective and not principally for providing political leadership.

However in the Nigerian state, colonialism could be viewed from two active phases of political governance. The first phase is the phase of political governance by the British colonialist through the traditional institution (Crowder 1968; Oronsaye 2009). This was characterized by rulership because the British officials controlled and determined public policies and such policies were cosmetically foisted on the people by traditional elites. Thus, the people including the traditional elites were excluded basically from the process of rule making and this affected the level of political maturity and the imbibing of democratic norms needed for a functional democracy that was later introduced through constitutional concessions by the British.

The second phase is the phase of the involvement of the educated elites in nationalist activities (Adigwe, 1979). In this phase, the British colonialist although comfortable with traditional political arrangement in that the system was conforming to resource exploitation, though with little resistance from sections where traditional political institutions were altered to be compatible with the centralized form; the trend in world politics especially after the second world war favoured the principle of self determination. As a result, the educated elites were accommodated in the governmental process, first through the adoption of the elective principle in the 1922 Clifford constitution and later the 1951 Macpherson Constitution which led to the formation of more political parties: the Action Group (AG) and Northern people's Congress (NPC) in 1951. (Azelama, 2010).

The implication of the above is that party Politics became ethnicized as AG was to the west, NPC to the North and the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) that was created in 1923 and which later transformed into the National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) in 1944 was to the East. However, it is important to emphasize that unlike what was obtainable in the first phase, the educated elites provided some form of political leadership because the political parties though ethnic based, served as a tool for political socialization and recruitment, interest articulation, interest aggregation, political communication as well as getting the people involved in the process of rule making, implementation and adjudication. This phase witnessed the widening of the political space for political participation though under the direction and dictates of British colonialists.

From this perspective, one could vividly argue that although some form of political leadership were provided by the educated elites but such leadership no doubt fell short of functional democratic norms as a result of sectionalism in politicking for the control of political power, poor political culture as a result of political distortions by British political domination, politics associated with spontaneous reactions on the part of the people with the attendant problem of social disorder rather than reactions emanating from informed ideas.

#### Political Leadership under Civilian Regimes

##### The First and Second Republic

In the first republic, sectional party politics, poor political leadership, chaotic situations arising from spontaneous reactions became more manifest. This is because the above stated attributes were made to be submissive to the shared interest of acquiring political independence by the politicians under colonialism. After the attainment of political independence, politics and political leadership became characterized by sectional interest, thuggery, bitterness, suspicion, political disorder among others (Omodia 2003; Aper 2008).

In other words, the mutual suspicion between the North-South and intra South-East and West became more manifest and thus, political leadership though provided, but it was regionally based. This above fuelled the termination of the republic with chaotic situation witnessed in the western region which led to the declaration of a state of emergency

in the region. This is coupled with the crisis associated with the 1963 census, the 1964 and 1965 elections which culminated into the 1966 abortion of the republic (Ademoyega 1981; Nwosu, Olaniyi and Oladele 1998).

As regard the Second Republic attempt was made to register political parties that were nationally based in terms of spread. As a result, five political parties were registered to contest for political offices in the general elections of 1979. These were: the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), the Nigeria People's Party (NPP), the Great Nigeria people's Party (GNPP) and the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP). It is however important to state that, of all the five political parties, the NPN turned out to be an elitist cadre based national party based on spread and achievements in polls, while other parties manifested ethnic spread (Kurfi, 1983; Yamma, 2008).

The above scenario was an improvement on what was obtainable in the First Republic in terms of party politics and political leadership in that political leadership in the republic was regionally determined and felt by the people. However, the sharp difference between the First and Second Republic could be attributed to the balkanization of federal regional structure by the military in favour of multiple State structures (19) that were economically and administratively weak and depended on the centre.

Conversely, the growing influence of the NPN in areas considered to be the stronghold of the parties that were viewed by indigenous politicians as synonymous to the stronghold of other party leaders which date back to regional politics of the first republic no doubt served as impediment to the nationalization of the party system. For instance, the so called 'landslide' victory of the NPN in capturing the States of Bendel and Oyo which were formally of the UPN, Anambra State formally of the NPP- the home state of the leader of the party Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and Gongola, formally of the GNPP in the 1983 Gubernatorial elections snowballed into political pandemonium and state of anomie as a result of accusations of electoral rigging by the opposition parties against the ruling NPN as the victories occurred in the stronghold of opposition Parties which date back to the colonial days (Yamma, 2008).

#### The Aborted Third Republic.

However, in the aborted third republic, the objective of providing a functional national party leadership rather than the ethnicization of the process, led the military administration of Ibrahim Babangida to adopt a two party system in the Social Democratic Party and the National Republican Convention (NRC) (Opara, 2007). This experiment was successful in the sense that ethnic party politics was checked especially with the defeat of the NRC Presidential Candidate- Alhaji Bashir Tofa in his home State Kano and some other Northern States by Chief M.K.O Abiola, the SDP Presidential candidate (Opara, 2007), a feat that changed the political orientation of the Nigerian state up to date.

On the other hand, the fragile nature of the political institution became manifest especially with the annulment of the Presidential election by the military administration of Babangida and the acceptance by the political parties of their willingness to re-contest the presidential seat. This was believed to be a function of the emerged structure of the parties in that they were created by the government and thus not deeply rooted in the people.

#### Military Rule

Military administration in the political governance of Nigeria has been characterized with the militarization of the political process based on the following attributes:

- Suspension of the constitution.
- The governance through decrees and edicts.
- Curtailement of civil liberties and fundamental human rights.
- Exclusion of the people in the political process of policy initiation and implementation which is often limited to the prime movers of coups.
- The seizure of power through force- Coup d'état.
- Appointment of civilians into political offices for the purpose of legitimizing the government.
- Seizure of power based on custodian factor or as corrective regimes.

The above attributes had characterized military administrations in Nigeria and by implication negates the principle of political leadership in that the political process excludes the people. In other words, system or governmental survival under military dictatorship in Nigeria was never anchored on the political power of the people but basically on the concept of 'custodian theory' and 'corrective regime' which often fade with time and therefore leading to

political instability in form of counter coup d'état. Examples could be cited with the regimes of Yakubu Gowon which utilized the custodian theory first for power acquisition by emphasizing on the indispensability of federalism in the Nigerian state, which the Irons government undermined in favour of unitarism and which the Gowon's government felt propelled its intervention for the purpose of sustenance (Adigwe,1979). The second was the utilization of the same theory for power consolidation especially as regard the need to maintain an indivisible Nigerian geopolitical entity that was threatened by the Eastern region.

Example of the use of the concept of 'corrective regime' was also associated with military regimes of Buhari and Babangida. While the Buhari government purported to have taken over power from Shagari's government in the second republic as a result of economic mismanagement, corruption, misappropriation of funds to mention but few, the Babangida's government was said to have been propelled by the deviation from the mission that necessitated the birth of Buhari's government(Olagunju,Jinadu and Oyovbaire 1993). .

The import however of the above scenario is that military government especially in the Nigerian State was characterized by a high level of political fragility or instability because successive regimes tend to be destroyed by the same ills they claim necessitated their intervention especially with the lack of moderating capacity of the people.

#### The Fourth Republic.

The background of political leadership in the Nigerian State both under civilian regimes and military dictatorship indicate a scenario where political instability persisted in the Nigerian body-politic as a result of the utilization of ethnic politics as a tool for corruption, poor political leadership, instituting fragile political institutions, the manifestation of political norms that were antithetical to democratic survival (Omodia,2009). Thus, the challenge of the present republic vis-à-vis democratic survival is the injection of functional democratic orientation and norms into the Nigerian people in order to serve as vanguard of democracy and good governance. This based on past observation could only be achieved in an atmosphere of party centred nationalism rather than ethnicization.

The Nigerian state therefore of the Fourth Republic, especially with the registration of more than fifty political parties is an indication that party politics is so weak. In addition, the existence of a dominant political party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), a truly national party is also an expectation that: (1) the party should be able to provide a truly national political leadership for the Nigerian state. (2) The party representatives both in its emergence and policies should be guided by national sentiments and democratic tenets.

However, unfolding events in the Nigerian body-politic between 1999 and date shows the manifestation of intra ethnic party politics in the Nigerian polity, especially through the zoning system. For instance, the two parties that fielded candidates in the presidential election of 1999, the PDP and the All People's Party (APP) zoned the presidential seat to the South; this witnessed the emergence of southern presidential candidates-Chief Olusegun Obasanjo of the PDP and Chief Olu Falaye of the APP( Egwemi,2007). This could be seen as simply a device of ethnicizing party politics both at the intra and inter party level, unlike in previous republics where it was majorly at inter party level .On observational basis what accounted for the above scenario is that, while the formation of political parties especially in the First and Second Republic were associated with charismatic leadership of the leaders, in the Fourth Republic such charisma does not exist as parties were either formed by group or association without clear cut influence.

It is indeed needful to state that the lack of clear-cut influence among politicians and the emergence of the zoning system may have worked thus far because the present democratic experiment could be said to have survived more than other experiments of the other republics. However, unfolding events in the Nigerian polity shows that the present system is so fragile because of the personalization of leadership especially by the political representatives. In other words, charismatic leadership of the past republic was important in ensuring party discipline and supremacy especially in terms of carrying-out party manifestoes. For instance, the implementation of the party programme of free education in UPN controlled States under the political leadership of Chief Obafemi Awolowo (Bello,2008). In the present situation, party representatives in government especially the President and Governors are automatically the leaders of the party in their states and the nation. The implication therefore is that, the party system is characterized by indiscipline, the seizure of the party structure by the political leaders and blind loyalty to persons rather than the party.

The above have characterized party politics and political leadership in the Nigerian state. The scenario no doubt is antithetical to democratic survival in Nigeria. It therefore shows that the emergence of very powerful party representatives at the expense of party control could lead to the demise of the zoning system for selfish and class interest. As a matter of fact, the present democratic experiment of the fourth republic has survived up to a decade not as a function of zoning but the resolve of Nigerians to perfect democracy in Nigeria through long lasting experience. This is because the so called zoning is not embedded in the people who are supposed to be drivers of democracy. Rather, it is designed by the elites for elitist interest in that the products of such system are often not accepted to the people but foisted on them through electoral rigging.

## CONCLUSION

The position of this paper is that if the present democratic experiment of the Nigerian Fourth Republic is to stand the test of time, there is need for a transformed and integrative leadership that would serve as a drive for socio-economic and political development. In other words, the idea is that the development of the citizenry through political participation would snowball into maturity and self believe not only needed for democratic development, but also for socio-economic development.

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